

## Game learning - Action methods and new technologies

### Aprendizaje a través del juego - Técnicas activas y nuevas tecnologías



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#### Abstract

The possibilities that the new technologies, particularly the role-playing video games, contribute to the development of the action techniques and the psychodrama are raised. As an example of these methodologies, the experience of the authors in the use of a video role-playing game, the Pace of the Waves, in the area of communication and leadership is presented to the training of public administration professionals. The advantages and limitations of this tool are discussed, as well as its applications to professional and personal development. Finally, we reflect on the encounter between the traditional and the new in action techniques and psychodrama.

#### Key words

gamification, psychodrama, leadership, training

#### Resumen

Se plantean las posibilidades que las nuevas tecnologías, en particular los videojuegos de rol, aportan al desarrollo de las técnicas activas y el psicodrama. Como ejemplo de estas metodologías, se presenta la experiencia de los autores en el uso de un videojuego de rol, El Compás de las Olas, en el ámbito de la comunicación y el liderazgo para la formación de profesionales de la administración pública. Se discuten las ventajas y limitaciones de esta herramienta, así como sus aplicaciones en el desarrollo profesional y personal. Por último, se reflexiona sobre el encuentro entre lo tradicional y lo nuevo en las técnicas activas y el psicodrama.

#### Palabras clave

gamificación, psicodrama, liderazgo, formación

## INTRODUCTION

Action techniques and psychodrama through the enacting of different situations, often associated with personal and relational conflicts, facilitate the incorporation of the emotional element in learning. In this way, they promote the incorporation of new ways of feeling, thinking and acting. Beyond the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, these methodologies are related to personal and professional development processes (Baim, Burmeister & Maciel, 2007).

Jacob Moreno developed this methodology at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since then, action techniques and psychodrama have undergone a progressive evolution. Although initially associated with group therapy, over time, their use has spread to other fields such as health, education, social services and business organisations. On the other hand, different authors have contributed to the development and enrichment of their technical and methodological aspects (Blatner, 1996, 2000).

This evolution has been accelerated in recent years by the arrival of new technologies and the impetus they have received due to the lockdown and the confinements associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. In a short time, our daily lives have been invaded by mobile phones, social networks, internet search engines and, in general, the online world.

As a result, there is a two-way development of action methodologies and psychodrama. New frameworks are being explored in the context of online groups and, associated with this approach, new techniques from the world of virtual reality are being incorporated.

Until very recently, one could practically only think of working with action techniques in face-to-face groups. Today, however, online groups using action techniques and psychodrama are becoming increasingly common. For this purpose, traditional techniques for face-to-face groups are adapted to the possibilities offered by video-conference platforms, such as Zoom. These tools include the possibility of making virtual sub-groups, sharing the screen or drawing on a common blackboard.

The online group could be perceived as “colder” than the face-to-face one, but it is more convenient in the sense that you participate from home or the office. It also allows the meeting of people who live far from each other.

Furthermore, new technologies offer new tools that did not exist before or were poorly developed. Perhaps the clearest representatives of this group are the role games. Initially, they were simply regarded as a means of entertainment and over time their use has expanded into other areas such as personal growth and training (Kent, 2001).

In role-playing games, the player creates a character through which he or she is introduced to an epic adventure, a fantasy life or a professional experience, to name a few examples.

Finally, it is a different kind of role playing, as the people do not play their roles in the same physical space. Whether that is a disadvantage or an advantage is difficult to say. They are simply different. But, in any case, video games offer new development opportunities to the wide and varied range of action methodologies.

### GAME BASED LEARNING

A role-playing game is characterised by offering the opportunity to live an adventure (epic, social, work, etc.) stepping into the shoes of a character with a special personality and characteristics. In other words, it allows the player to assume a predefined role and interact with their environment based on it. To facilitate this immersion, the character often has an origin story that is told at the beginning of the game.

The beginning of this type of game can be traced back to the 1960s. In particular, when William A. Gamson,

professor of sociology at Boston College, created a board game called SimSoc, which recreated a society in which it was possible to work on aspects such as communication or politics (Attia, 2016).

But its boom came in 1974 with the famous Dungeons & Dragons. In this new board game, each player assumed an identity and skills that gave him or her access to a group of legendary heroes destined to live amazing adventures. You could play the role of a wizard, a warrior, a sorcerer or a rogue, and make your skills available to the group in order to overcome the difficult tests it had to face. This symbiosis, player-character, implies a strong bond between them.

Usually the game has a “Master” who performs the coordination tasks of the game. In this way, these games added a group component to the role-playing experience.

The transformation that computers underwent in the following years made it possible for the use of boards, dice and cards to be replaced by the creation of complex and striking computer environments. From there, an extensive typology of role-playing games emerged. Some games such as Dungeons & Dragons were adapted to new technologies and other new games appeared. Some of them, such as the Sims, raised the possibility of living an “adult” life. In this sense, the player made decisions regarding the housing, employment, social relations, etc. of his/her character (Goldberg, 2011).

In all those cases, beyond the plot, what was surely more attractive was that, in one way or another, it was possible to create a virtual identity that represented the player in a simulated environment, that is, an avatar.

Although initially video games were played on consoles and computers individually, the arrival of the internet brought the concept of online gaming and changed this situation. To some extent, online gaming replicates the concept of groupality present in board games. However, other interpretations are possible. Often, teams were made up of members without any previous relation between them who may have very different geographical and cultural backgrounds. These teams have a reference figure or leader.

The success achieved by this type of games has also inspired renowned characters in the cinema. For example, in 2009 James Cameron released the successful film Avatar (one of the highest grossing films in the history of cinema). The main character in this film is able to connect with an “alter ego”. Through him, he explores an amazing alien planet and is able to interact with its inhabitants. Other similar cases are the films The

Ender Game by Gavin Hood, released in 2013 or, the most recent one, Ready Player One directed by Steven Spielberg in 2018. However, it is important to remember that cinema remains in the world of fantasy and therefore cannot be considered on the same level as reality.

The educational world has also incorporated aspects of video games into some pedagogical approaches. Little by little, a whole methodological trend has been developed under the name of Game Based Learning. It includes teaching methodologies that incorporate the tool of play as the cornerstone of the learning process (Gómez-Martín, Gómez-Martín & González-Calero, 2012). On the other hand, a video game offers a magnificent opportunity to experiment in a safe space.

Game Based Learning probably offers the largest range of video role-playing games in the field of adult education. This methodology fits very well in the area of Human Resources to facilitate the development of relational skills. It can serve as an example, a training on customer service in which the relationship between the professional and the user is simulated (Kapp, 2012).

The use of this methodology is spreading throughout banks, large corporations, public administrations, and other organizations.

In this sense, the consulting firm Deloitte recently assured that 25% of the companies' processes will include gamification dynamics in the next few years. The IT research consultancy firm Gartner stated in another study that this percentage will rise to 50% in those processes related to innovation. According to this same source, 70% of the companies that make up the Global 2000 list are already using gamification in some of their processes (Playmotiv, 2018).

The development of a training video game poses numerous difficulties. It requires a heterogeneous team that includes scriptwriters with a high level of technical preparation, illustrators, designers, marketing experts and programmers. This collaboration makes the process complex. As a result, the video game is more expensive to produce.

Finally, some changes at neurobiological level have been observed in video game players. These studies show how video game players develop the areas of the central nervous system related to attention, visual abilities, the emotional world, memory and learning. These findings support the ability of this tool to provoke neurological changes associated with learning processes (Bavelier & Green, 2016;

Palau, Marron, Viejo-Sobera & Redolar-Ripoll, 2017).

### OUR EXPERIENCE "THE PACE OF THE WAVES"

For years, we have devoted ourselves to training professionals in the areas of leadership and communication through the company Rivendel Grupos y Organizaciones. Based on our training in group analysis and psychodrama, we decided to develop a video game aimed at training.

The aim was to offer training in the field of management skills with an experiential component that could be suitable for a wide group of professionals. Thus, "The Pace of the Waves" was born. There is a Spanish and an English version of the game. (See trailer, Palacios & Palacios, 2019).

At the beginning of the game, the player creates his or her own character by choosing the gender and name. Then, the character appears swimming in the sea and is dragged by a current to the Crystal Pearl. There, he will replace Cimódoce, the Wave Master, who is in charge of leading the team of operators responsible for producing the ocean waves by producing music.

As the new Master of the Waves, they have to lead a team and get involved in conflicting situations. In this way, they have to make difficult decisions about the process of making waves, resolve internal disputes and old rivalries, keep their boss informed and, as a final check, lead the team in its confrontation with the Leviathan, a terrible monster.

During this time, the player does not always identify with the Wave Master. Sometimes you change your character and become one of the operators. In this way, they have the opportunity to observe the team dynamics from a different perspective.

As a means of help in this difficult task, the Wave Master has the possibility to consult some specialised documents on communication and leadership, as well as to receive the advice of Mentor, a consultant specialised in team management.

The game contains an evaluation system based on practical exercises and tests. There is a forum in which the tutor or students propose discussion topics related to the game that facilitate interaction among professionals. During the course there are also two chats that allow the participants in the game to meet online.

Throughout the game, the player has a score that

changes according to the results obtained in the tests and quizzes. If at any point the score is less than 50% of the total points, the player must start the game again. At all times, there is a personalised follow-up of the player by an online tutor.

Seen from a certain perspective, this game can be described as a role-playing experience in which the player enacts the team manager role. This role allows the exercise of decision making, role reversal, monitoring and consultation of documents with theoretical information on the situations that are taking place.

Several Spanish public administrations have contracted the compass of the waves as part of the training of their professionals. There were 217 trainees registered for these courses.

175 trainees out of the 217 registered, (81.11%) completed the game.

10 registered trainees (4.61%) did not start the course. The organisation contracts the courses, so that the training has no financial cost for the students. This situation probably diminishes the commitment of the students to the training and helps to understand why some professionals do not start the game.

Finally, 30 trainees (13.82%) started the course but did not finish it. The most frequent reason for leaving the game, once started, is technical. Some trainees have got very old computers that are not able to manage the game properly. Of course, there were also people who were not interested in the experience.

The average time spent on completing the game is 6 hours and 34 minutes. Although there were considerable differences between trainees (standard deviation of 4 hours and 48 minutes), 8 trainees out of 154, 5.2% decided to replay after they had finished. They were probably interested in exploring the alternative outcomes they would have obtained if they had made different decisions. We do not have this data for a group of 63 students.

The entities with which we have worked have not yet provided us with the results of the satisfaction survey forms completed by the students. However, in the comments sent to us directly by the students at the end of the game, surprise and a favourable evaluation of the methodology predominate. The game is considered to be enjoyable and allows students to acquire useful tools for carrying out their usual work.

The classic structure of action techniques includes three phases: warming up, action and sharing. In the warm-up phase the group gets in touch with its emotional situation and prepares to carry out the exercise. The action, as its name suggests, is associated with the enacting stage. Finally, the sharing is the phase where the word is the protagonist. In it, the group members share how they have felt during the exercise and what it has evoked in their lives.

Following this scheme, we can distinguish, in a wide sense, the three stages in this video game. The warming up would be the beginning of the game, the arrival of the player at the Crystal Pearl and the conversation with Cimódoce, the Master of the Waves, in which she offers the player the possibility of succeeding her in the position. The action would be the development of the game. The sharing would be associated with the readings, the forum and the chat.

In two editions, the realization of the game was complemented by a face-to-face seminar. This session took place a few days after the end of the game and brought together the students and the tutor. There were two groups per course. This seminar was dedicated to discuss any aspect related to the game.

The face-to-face seminars were very participatory. The topics that had a greater protagonism were the fact that someone who does not previously belong to the team was chosen as the new wave master (this situation is rare in the context of these professionals), the gift that the old wave master offers to her successor (she lets him choose between an expensive pen, an amulet and a watch to arrive punctually at the meetings), the handling of a situation in which a scapegoat appears, the discussion about the degree of direction required by the leadership in some circumstances and the emotional burden of the leader.

Sometimes trainees pointed out aspects of the game that the authors had overlooked. For example, Caliope, an operator, shows jealousy of the new Master of Waves. In a way, they showed the unconsciousness of the authors and the phenomenon of countertransference, accepting a wide sense of this concept (Freud, 1910; Sandler, Dare, Dreher & Alex, 1992).

These sessions offered the group the opportunity of having a personal relationship. As a consequence, the sharing was richer and deeper. In this way, the training gained in interest and depth.

In any case, these sessions represented an interesting meeting point between traditional methodologies and those associated with new technologies. Although it may sometimes seem that there is a certain competitiveness between “the traditional” and “the modern,” in reality, it is very constructive to seek their complementarity. After all, the newest methodologies are the result of the development of traditional methodologies.

### CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Video role-playing games offer a “friendly” way to learn. In a way, they can be considered “gentle” experiential training. And, from this point of view, they provide more practical and internalised training than theoretical approaches.

This new methodology requires much less emotional effort than the effort associated with classic role playing or “live” psychodrama, especially when it is based on real situations. Moreover, training through a video game is totally flexible in terms of time, does not require travelling and is cheap since there is no limited number of trainees.

Logically, training based on a role-playing game poses general situations that are less intense than the scenes proposed and performed by the professional in in-presence training. For this reason, it is less in-depth and specific than training based on in-person action techniques. When the video game experience is complemented by face-to-face sessions, this difference in intensity diminishes.

In other words, if we represent learning graphically in a line diagram with one extreme being 100% theoretical and the other 100% experiential, the lectures would be near the theoretical pole, the action methodologies near the experiential pole and the video role-playing would be in the central zone, possibly closer to the experiential one.

Team leaders often need to develop their communication and leadership skills. Effective training in these areas requires a certain experiential component that brings technical knowledge closer to the everyday working reality.

However, many of these professionals are unwilling to invest a high level of emotional involvement in their training process. In this sense, the new action methodologies are especially adapted to their expectations and needs.

It is possible that this same reasoning can be generalized to other population groups interested in participating in change processes. Then, role-playing video games have a wide field of application in therapy, personal development and other training areas.

The San Junipero episode of the Netflix Black Mirror series (2016) received two Primetime Emmy Awards. It addresses the issue of virtual reality by developing the concept proposed in the film Avatar, mentioned above. In the same sense, we are invited to live an experience in a virtual world parallel to reality that we could call objective. As it has happened in other occasions, it is possible that science fiction becomes reality (Mihelj, 2016)

Perhaps we will not have to wait for a long time to see how facing situations belonging to a virtual reality are usually a part of personal development or training processes. A kind of virtual psychodrama. We could say, it would be one fantasy inside another. In fact, virtual reality is already part of the world of communication and marketing (Diamandis & Kotler, 2020). In a way it is disturbing, but it can also be considered hopeful. Who knows?

Logically, all these changes affect the general population, but particularly professionals who work with experiential groups. To what extent are we willing to incorporate tools from new technologies into our work?

This question would allow us to place ourselves in a psychodramatic line between two extremes that would represent total rejection and total acceptance of the contributions proposed by the new technologies. Where would we stand? In any case, the world is changing, or more precisely, it has already changed, and more or less, we are changing with it. Each one of us has our own pace and preferences. Moving out of the “comfort zone” is threatening, but it can represent an opportunity for growing.

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